Commentary

Life's Brief Candle
A Shakespearean Guide to Death and Dying for Compassionate Physicians

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Death is a part of the human experience, a necessary consequence of life that we all must face. It is incongruous that death, which remains the ultimate fruition of medicine and, indeed, the only panacea, has been scientifically neglected. For example, a search of the medical literature published in 1996 identifies 112 papers that contain the keyword "death," a topic that directly affects everyone. In contrast, a similar search reveals more than 1,000 references pertaining to schizophrenia, a disorder with a population prevalence of about 1%.

Perhaps this relative paucity of information reflects an avoidance of death in the traditional medical model. The care of dying patients receives little attention during medical education, and as a result, "many physicians receive inadequate training in how to manage the dying process, and many enter into such situations with limited confidence."[1(p268)] Perhaps this contributes to the adversarial attitude many physicians have toward death, viewing it as "just one more disease to be conquered, a tenacious but not invincible foe."[2(p226)] Because physicians' emotions and fears "are inextricably bound up with the suffering and death of their patients. . . . [however, e]xtreme stress and unnerving ambiguity sometimes lead to exhaustion, emotional fragmentation, and the erosion of meaning in their lives."[3(p233)]

Because physicians are often in a unique position in the profound moments between life and death, it is important to have an appreciation of the emotional aspects of the dying process and to be comfortable in discussing them. Drawing upon expressions in literature can facilitate this,[4] and the work of William Shakespeare provides ample material.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, MD, was a pioneer in speaking with dying patients about their feelings.[5] She described five stages of coping with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.[6] Obviously, individual responses can vary greatly, and these stages are not intended to be either sequential or all-inclusive. An analysis of Shakespeare's work provides examples of each of these stages. This suggests that the human experience of death has changed little over the past four centuries and offers further credibility to Kübler-Ross's formulation. Moreover, central to Kübler-Ross's writings is the concept that "the psychological needs of dying patients tend to change, and compassionate care requires that physicians tune into these changes and meet new needs as they arise."[1(p270)]

Denial

In Kübler-Ross's model, disbelief about the prognosis is the first response. Denial is reported to be a common emotion in those facing death from illness; it is also experienced by the bereaved. Initially, "denial can be a useful and necessary defense"[7] that precedes other coping strategies. It "removes the idea of death from our everyday deliberations and conveniently stores it just outside of sight or consciousness."[5(p238)] Denial may be an adaptive mechanism that prepares us to manage death maturely.

Interestingly, the denial of death is not a common theme in Shakespeare. Most characters are well aware of their mortality, and many do not hesitate to face death. Notably, military characters often tend to equate death with honor and hold the latter in higher regard. For example, the title character in *Julius Caesar* declares, "Set honor in one eye and death i' the other, / And I will look on both indifferently" (Act I, scene ii, lines 86–87). This cavalier attitude may reflect a desensitization stemming from having risked death many times. Alternatively, it may be interpreted as a mechanical aphorism reflecting a denial of death's power by one who has avoided serious reflection on it.

A notable antithesis to this mentality is demonstrated by a comic character in *King Henry IV, Part I.* Falstaff is a lackluster soldier who rationalizes his reluctance to fight in the following soliloquy (Act V, scene i, lines

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126–139):

PRINCE: Why, thou owest God a death. *[Exits]*
FALSTAFF: 'Tis not due yet; I would be loath to pay him before his day. What need I be so forward with him that calls not on me? Well, 'tis no matter; honor pricks me on. Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? how then? Can honor set to a leg? no: Or an arm? no: Or take away the grief of a wound? no. Honor hath no skill in surgery, then? no. What is honor? A word. What is in that word honor? air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? he that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? no. Doth he hear it? no. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? no. Why? detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon: and so ends my catechism.

In valuing life above recognition, Falstaff's reaction seems to be more human than does Caesar's. In "denying" death, he embraces life. Interestingly, Falstaff goes on to feign his own death in battle and is later knighted for his heroism.

Anger

Kübler-Ross cites anger as a second stage of dying. This animosity can be directed toward oneself, God, one's physicians, or whomever one holds responsible. It is understandable for those facing death to be angry with their circumstance. Death may often seem to be an undeserved punishment. The unfairness may engender the attitude that "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport" (*King Lear*, Act IV, scene i, lines 37–38). The following example shows anger mingled with a sense of desperation (*Macbeth*, Act III, scene i, lines 108–114):

2ND MURDERER: I am one, my liege,
Whom the vile blows and buffets of the world
Have so incensed that I am reckless what
I do to spite the world.
. . .
1ST MURDERER: So weary with disasters, tugg'd with fortune,
That I would set my life on any chance,
To mend it, or be rid on't.

This reaction might be similar to that of a chronically ill patient considering further chemotherapy. It conveys a sense of exhausted defeat mingled with both reluctance and hope.

The prospect of death may be especially bitter when faced by a person in the prime of life. Some cultures in the past (and present) have blamed misfortune on astrologic processes. For example, on hearing (counterfeit) news of his bride's death, Romeo vents his contempt for fate, saying, "then I defy you, stars!" (*Romeo and Juliet,* Act V, scene i, line 24). Similarly, Othello blames his woes on an aberrant lunar orbit, saying, "It is the very error of the moon." (*Othello, the Moor of Venice,* Act V, scene ii, line 109). It is important for compassionate physicians to recognize that patients express animosity in response to myriad emotions and to accept angry outbursts with equanimity.

Bargaining

A period of bargaining is described in Kübler-Ross's model. This may be an internally or externally directed negotiation to "be on one's best behavior" and thus in some way alter or improve the future. For example, persons coping with impending death might demonstrate increased compliance with a medical regimen, or alternatively, they might propel themselves toward religion in the hope of divine reward. The need to bargain may be brought about by the fleeting nature of life, as time seems to vanish faster the less of it we have: "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me; / For now hath time made me his numbering clock; / My thoughts are minutes" (*The Tragedy of King Richard II*, Act V, scene v, lines 49–51).

A striking example of bargaining is found in *Othello*. The title character has been treacherously deceived by his servant Iago into believing that his wife, Desdemona, has been adulterous. Othello confronts her and makes known his intention to kill her for the crime he imagines she has committed (Act V, scene ii, lines 36, 78–84):

DESDEMONA: I hope you will not kill me. . . .O banish me, my lord, but kill me not!
OTHELLO: Down, strumpet!
DESDEMONA: Kill me to-morrow; let me live tonight!
OTHELLO: Nay, if you strive—
DESDEMONA: But half an hour!
OTHELLO: Being done, there is no pause.
DESDEMONA: But while I say one prayer!
OTHELLO: It is too late.

Pathetically, the goals of Desdemona's pleas become more humble as the outlook becomes increasingly dismal. Later, Iago's illusion comes to light, and Othello bargains for his reputation before destroying himself (Act V, scene ii, lines 295, 340–345).

Nought I did in hate, but all in honor.
. . .
I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then you must speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well.

Although when presented with "bargaining" patients whose hopes may hinge on their physicians' words, it may be tempting to be placatory, it is essential to incorporate honesty with optimism.

Depression

Depression is a fourth stage of coping with dying. This is a complex psychological state that can manifest in countless variations. Depression may be a corollary to feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, guilt, loss of one's integrity, regret at abandoning unrealized dreams or unresolved conflicts, and fear of the unknown. It may be a cause or a consequence of physical or emotional suffering.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes adroitly plumb the depths of depression with highly evocative imagery and lan-

guage. Hamlet is perhaps the definitive crestfallen protagonist; his sorrowful soliloquies are inarguably among the most renowned passages in literature. Hamlet's depression ironically stems not from an unwillingness to die, but rather from a reluctance to live (*Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark,* Act I, scene ii, lines 129–134):

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world.

The origin of Hamlet's anhedonia is the politically motivated murder of his father and his ensuing hesitation in avenging this death. Hamlet's longing for release is tempered by a respect for biblical law and is emblematic of a defense strategy of intellectualization that is taken to the point of indecision.

Shakespeare's command of diction allows readers to enter into the mental state of his characters. Those coping with their impending death convey a palpable mood of despondency through their figurative language. King Richard II's dark, depressive broodings serve to distance him from readers, as in this excerpt: "And nothing can we call our own but death / And that small model of the barren earth / Which serves as paste and cover to our bones" (*Richard II*, Act III, scene ii, lines 152–153).

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most pathetic and detestable characters, as his downfall is self-induced and premeditated. He does not deserve our sympathy as a victim of fate or misunderstanding (as Romeo or Othello might). His ambition leaves a trail stained with the innocent blood of his friends. Before his physical demise (which occurs offstage), Macbeth's soul dies a slow death in self-revulsion and despair. His depression pulsates through his dark words (*Macbeth*, Act V, scene v, lines 19–28):

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

There is the sense that each new day is seen as "heralding increased sickness, pain, or disability, never as the beginning of better times."[8p639] Later, Macbeth's depression translates into a longing for death: "I 'gin to be aweary of the sun, / And wish the estate o' the world were now undone" (Act V, scene v, lines 49–50). In the following passage, he sadly decries his lost innocence, but he merely demonstrates regret for his personal loss rather than remorse for the evil his actions have wrought (*Macbeth*, Act V, scene iii, lines 22–28):

I have lived long enough; my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

It is important that physicians learn to perceive the signs of depression in their patients, dying or otherwise, and to take the appropriate management steps. By communicating effectively, a physician can "actually reduce patients' suffering by recognizing their personal needs, feelings, and expectations."[5p237]

Acceptance

Acceptance is appropriately Kübler-Ross's final stage in handling death. It is the culmination of intense introspection and interpersonal communication. Ideally, the dying person has resolved all the issues that represented previous conflicts. The most mature acceptance of one's mortality would likely involve placing one's life into perspective, feeling at ease with one's place in the Cosmos, and being ready, albeit reluctant, to die. Though this process is often eased with the help of family and friends, physicians should not exclude themselves from this challenging role.

There are a number of mental approaches dying persons may take to reconcile themselves with death. For some, dying may offer the opportunity for restoration, in the sense that "personal relationships with others and with the world are defined and made explicit."[9p138] Although religious faith provides a source of strength for some, others may take secular comfort in accepting the cyclic nature of life. Theology and the concept of a higher intelligence that cares for and rewards us is central to the psyche of vast millions of people. Indeed, "religion is often invoked as a repository of time-tested wisdom and practical guidance as we deal with our natural fear of finitude."[3(p231)] People facing death may take comfort in the belief that they are participating in God's plan. Indeed, some are confident that life is a mere prelude to what lies beyond. A fatalistic sense of calm is displayed by Hamlet (Act V, scene ii, lines 208–213):

There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be.

This sentiment is echoed by Edgar in *King Lear*: "Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither: / Ripeness is all" (Act V, scene ii, lines 8–10). The spiritual inclinations of both Hamlet and Edgar reflect the belief in a God who has knowledge of and control over the lives of all creatures. Inherent in this ethos is the idea that good behavior and prayer serve to prepare the soul for judgment. These concepts may make the prospect of death more acceptable.

The next two passages also demonstrate a reconciliation with approaching death without directly referring to

religion. The first is from *Cymbeline* (Act IV, scene ii, lines 258–263):

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

The next passage is spoken by Romeo, whose mistaken belief that the sleeping Juliet is dead prompts him to consume a poison (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act V, scene iii, lines 109–115):

O, here will I set up my everlasting rest
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last!
Arms, take your last embrace! and lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain to engrossing death!

Both passages connote somewhat positive feelings toward death, and the acceptance appears to be a product of the recognition of its inevitability. Each also refers to death as offering a release from the travails of life, specifically from harsh elements and labor in the former and from fate and fatigue in the latter. Romeo's lines also exude a quality of regret, and the motif of being "star-crossed" is reiterated. Death can also be accepted with ambivalence, as in the following lines: "If thou and nature can so gently part, / The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch, / Which hurts, and is desired" (*Antony and Cleopatra,* Act V, scene ii, lines 297–299).

Dramatic interests often impede Shakespeare's characters from attaining a healthy degree of resolution concerning their death. The following examples demonstrate a rather morbid, less salubrious acceptance of death: "If I must die, / I will encounter darkness as a bride, / And hug it in my arms" (*Measure for Measure*, Act III, scene i, lines 83–85); "but I will be / A bridegroom in my death, and run into 't / As to a lover's bed" (*Antony and Cleopatra,* Act IV, scene xiv, lines 99-101) The next example takes this seemingly pathologic ratification of death to an extreme, employing imagery of putrefaction to instill a sense of horror (*The Life and Death of King John,* Act III, scene iv, lines 25–36):

Death, death; O amiable, lovely death!
Thou odoriferous stench! sound rottenness!
Arise forth from the couch of lasting night,
Thou hate and terror to prosperity,
And I will kiss thy detestable bones
And put my eyeballs in thy vaulty brows,
And ring these fingers with thy household worms
And stop this gap of breath with fulsome dust,
And be a carrion monster like thyself.
Come, grin on me, and I will think thou smilest
And buss thee as thy wife. Misery's love,
O come to me!

Each of the three preceding excerpts compares death to marriage, a seemingly paradoxic metaphor, as marriage is typically equated with joy and procreation. But the comparison is effective in revealing the disturbed emotions of the characters. The acceptance of death is not simply an acquiescence, but a willingness. Indeed, positive anticipation of one's own death may warrant intervention.

A unifying example of Kübler-Ross's model of death is found toward the end of *King Lear*. The following passage may be interpreted as tracing Lear's rapid progression through each stage of dying in response to the death of his daughter, Cordelia. A selfish and shortsighted character throughout most of the play, Lear ironically gains a sense of gallantry and empathy for others only moments before his own death. Psychologically, his grief over his daughter's death may be seen as a subconscious transference or a reciprocal reflection of the response to his own imminent demise. In his process of mourning, he concisely demonstrates denial, bargaining, anger, and depression (but dies before achieving any acceptance) (Act V, scene iii, lines 258–272):

She's gone for ever!
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives.
. . . .
This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt.
. . . .
A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!
I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever!
Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little. Ha!
What is't thou say'st?

Act V, scene iii, lines 305–308:

No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!

Conclusion

Looking at responses to death in Shakespeare's work can help in grasping life's final voyage. The topic merits contemplation, in that our medical progress has "permitted the prolongation of life without [offering] parallel guidelines for its termination."[10] When confronted by uncomfortable emotional situations, even experienced physicians may react by retreating into the familiar arena of jargon and technology, which does little to promote communication and understanding. Indeed, "when the personal needs of the dying patient are greatest and the need for technical expertise is lessening, the defining attributes of the good physician can be displayed at their finest."[9p141] Perhaps it is most apt to conclude this essay with the words of Kübler-Ross[11]:

Death is the key to the door of life. It is through accepting the finiteness of our individual existences that we are enabled to find the strength and courage to reject those extrinsic roles and

expectations and to devote each day of our lives—however long they may be—to growing as fully as we are able.

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